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California State Assembly

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INFORMATIONAL HEARING

Wednesday, May 13, 2026
1:30 p.m. -- State Capitol, Room 437

The Impact of Social Media on LGBTQ+ Youth: Benefits, Risks, and Safeguards

BACKGROUND

I. INTRODUCTION

Rising concerns about the implications of frequent social media use, especially for young people, have dominated news cycles and court rooms in recent years. Across the globe, countries are weighing whether to establish limitations on social media use for younger teens and children (typically under 16 years of age) to prevent harms associated with social media, such as cyberbullying, body-image issues, and social media addiction. However, some opponents of broad-based social media restrictions for minors have long argued that these platforms offer a lifeline for certain marginalized groups, especially LGBTQ+ youth. This informational hearing, which was developed in collaboration with staff of the California Legislative LGBTQ Caucus, will examine this issue more closely, including how LGBTQ+ youth use social media and the potential benefits and harms of social media for these youth.¹

The evidence presented in this background paper reflects the complicated reality of LGBTQ+ youth online: LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to rely on social media for support and community than their non-LGBTQ+ peers, and social media can offer invaluable resources to help young people parse through their identities. However, LGBTQ+ youth are at a disproportionately

¹ "LGBTQ+" is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning and serves to encompass all identities beyond heterosexual and cisgender.

greater risk for harassment, cyberbullying, and exploitation. To better understand how to weigh these tradeoffs, the Committee will hear testimony from panelists representing the perspectives of LGBTQ+ teenagers and their parents, LGBTQ+ advocates, and academics.

II. GENERAL CONCERNS ABOUT THE HARMS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUTH

The Surgeon General's 2023 Advisory Warning. In May 2023, former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued an advisory warning of the potential mental health impacts of social media on young people.² The advisory recognizes the benefits of social media for some users, including LGBTQ+ youth, but concludes “the current body of evidence indicates that while social media may have benefits for some children and adolescents, there are ample indicators that social media can also have a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents.”³ While noting that several complex factors shape social media’s influence on children and adolescents, the Surgeon General points to two primary risk factors: 1) harmful content, and 2) excessive and problematic use, such as compulsive or uncontrollable use. Harmful content includes:

- Extreme content such as live depictions of self-harm acts, like asphyxiation or cutting, “which can normalize such behaviors, including through the formation of suicide pacts and posing of self-harm models for others to follow.”⁴
- Bullying and harassment: roughly two-thirds of adolescents are “often” or “sometimes” exposed to hate-based content, with nearly 75 percent of adolescents stating that social media sites do a fair to poor job of addressing online harassment and bullying.⁵
- Predatory behaviors, including financial or sexual exploitation of children and adolescents; nearly 6-in-10 adolescent girls surveyed had received unwanted advances from strangers on social media platforms.⁶

The advisory also cites studies showing that on a typical weekday, nearly one in three adolescents report using screens – most commonly, social media – until midnight or later.⁷ One third or more of girls aged 11-15 feel “addicted” to certain platforms. Excessive use correlates with attention problems, feelings of exclusion, and sleep problems.⁸ Poor sleep, in turn, is linked with neurological development issues, depression, and suicidality.⁹

² “Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory” (May 23, 2023), <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>. (“Surgeon General’s Advisory”).

³ *Id.*, p. 4.

⁴ *Id.*, p. 8.

⁵ Alhaji et al., “Cyberbullying, Mental Health, and Violence in Adolescents and Associations With Sex and Race: Data From the 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey” *Global pediatric health* (2019), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2333794X19868887>; Vogels, “Teens and Cyberbullying,” Pew Research Center: *Internet, Science & Tech* (2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/12/15/teens-and-cyberbullying-2022/>.

⁶ Nesi, et al., “Teens and mental health: How girls really feel about social media” *Common Sense Media* (2023), <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/teens-and-mental-health-how-girls-really-feel-about-social-media>.

⁷ Rideout, V., & Robb, M. B. “Social media, social life: Teens reveal their experiences” *Common Sense Media* (2018), <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2018-social-mediasocial-life-executive-summary-web.pdf>.

⁸ Surgeon General’s Advisory, *supra*, at p. 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Excessive use is driven in part by systems that are optimized to maximize user engagement through design features, such as personalized recommendation algorithms, likes, push notifications, auto-play, and endless scroll.¹⁰ According to a former social media company executive's statements, such features were designed intentionally to increase time spent through features that "give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while."¹¹ These features "can trigger pathways comparable to addiction."¹² Young people with still-developing prefrontal cortexes who crave social reward and lack inhibition are especially susceptible.¹³ As of 2024, the average daily social media usage for US adolescents was 4.8 hours.¹⁴

Australia's Online Safety Amendment Act. Growing concerns about the impact of excessive social media use on teen mental health, especially for teen girls, led Australia in 2024 to pass the first national age-based restriction for social media accounts. In December 2025, the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill came into effect, effectively prohibiting any Australian younger than 16 from having an account on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, X, YouTube, Reddit, Twitch, and Kick.¹⁵ Repeated or serious violations by these social media companies could result in a fine of up to \$30 million.¹⁶ Concerns surrounding the impacts of the ban on LGBTQ+ young people led the eSafety Commissioner, the agency responsible for overseeing the social media ban, to partner with LGBTIQ+ Health Australia, a not-for-profit organization addressing health concerns of LGBTQ+ people, to provide essential resources for young LGBTQ+ people about how to navigate online spaces safely.¹⁷ The collaboration resulted in the creation of the "LGBTIQ+ learning lounge" on the eSafety Commissioner's website that provides LGBTQ+ youth with resources on how to safely meet in person with online friends, how to deal with online abuse, and tips for building resilience and positive online habits.¹⁸ Ultimately, the ban led to the termination of 4.7 million accounts held by 2.5 million children between the ages of 8 and 15, although some people younger than 16 have been able to maintain accounts due to lax age verification measures.¹⁹

¹⁰ Burhan & Moradzadeh, "Neurotransmitter Dopamine and its Role in the Development of Social Media Addiction" *Journal of Neurology & Neurophysiology* 507 (2020), <https://www.ioncworld.org/open-access/neurotransmitter-dopamine-da-and-its-role-in-the-development-of-social-mediaaddiction.pdf>.

¹¹ Alex Hern, 'Never get high on your own supply' – why social media bosses don't use social media," *The Guardian* (Jan. 23, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/jan/23/never-get-high-on-your-own-supply-why-social-media-bosses-dont-use-social-media>.

¹² Surgeon General's Advisory, *supra*, at p. 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Dr. Vivek Murthy, "Surgeon General: Why I'm Calling for a Warning Label on Social Media Platforms" *New York Times* (Jun. 17, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/17/opinion/social-media-health-warning.html>.

¹⁵ Helen Livingstone, "Australia had banned social media for kids under 16. How does it work?" *BBC News*, (Jan 22, 2026), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwyp9d3ddqyo>.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ "Consultation and cooperation," *eSafety Commissioner*, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/consultation-cooperation>.

¹⁸ "LGBTIQ+ learning lounge," *eSafety Commissioner*, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/lgbtiq/learning-lounge>.

¹⁹ "Social media platforms removed 4.7 million accounts after Australia banned them for children younger than 16," *PBS News*, (Jan. 16, 2026), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/social-media-platforms-removed-4-7-million-accounts-after-australia-banned-them-for-children-younger-than-16>.

Since Australia’s enactment of an age restriction, several other countries including Indonesia, France, Denmark, Spain, Germany, Greece, and Malaysia have enacted or are currently considering age limits, typically at age 15 or 16.²⁰

California’s past legislation aimed at protecting children online. With Silicon Valley at the center of technological innovation, California has long been a leader in responsible tech policy. Several legislative efforts over the years have attempted to protect children and teenagers from some of the greatest harms present on the internet. Importantly, much of California’s recent legislative approach has focused on addressing the root causes of social media addiction, particularly the use of personalized, engagement-maximizing algorithms. By targeting these addictive design features, the Legislature has sought to both mitigate harm and avoid potential First Amendment concerns associated with restricting access to lawful speech, while ensuring that policy solutions address the underlying drivers of compulsive use.

AB 2273 (Wicks, Ch. 320, Stats. 2022) established the California Age-Appropriate Design Code Act (AADC), which imposes obligations and restrictions on businesses that provide online services, products, or features likely to be accessed by children, including prohibiting the collection of a child’s precise geolocation; requiring age estimation, data minimization, and data protection impact assessments; and prohibiting dark patterns. Litigation regarding certain portions of the bill is ongoing.²¹ AB 2246 (Wicks, 2026) seeks to replicate the AADC’s provisions while excising portions courts have deemed unconstitutional.

SB 976 (Skinner, Ch. 321, Stats. 2024), the “Protecting Our Kids from Social Media Addiction Act” regulates how internet platforms allow minors to access personalized recommendation algorithms. The Act restricts minors’ access to algorithmic feeds, requires certain default settings, including restricting notifications, hiding like counts, and making accounts private, and mandates that the Attorney General adopt regulations governing age assurance by 2027. SB 976 was opposed by LGBTQ+ advocates, who argued that the bill assigned a “one-size-fits-all approach to parental controls” that may risk outing young LGBTQ+ people to unsupportive family members. The Act has been challenged on First Amendment grounds; litigation is ongoing.²²

AB 56 (Bauer-Kahan, Ch. 671, Stats. 2025) requires, beginning in 2027, social media platforms to display mental health warning labels about the harms associated with social media when a child logs on to the platform and after extended use.

AB 1043 (Wicks, Ch. 675, Stats. 2025) enacted the Digital Age Assurance Act, which enables users to provide their age during the initial setup of a mobile device or computer starting in 2027. The device’s operating system will then send a non-identifying age bracket signal – under 13, between 13 and 16, between 16 and 18, or at least 18 – to application stores to relay to application developers prior to the download and installation of an app. The bill was supported by The Source LGBTQ+ Center, who argued that AB 1043 would allow youth access to age-appropriate information about gender and sexuality without requiring platforms to employ

²⁰Aisha Malik, “These are the countries moving to ban social media for children” *TechCrunch* (Mar. 6, 2026), <https://techcrunch.com/2026/03/06/social-media-ban-children-countries-list/>.

²¹*NetChoice, LLC v. Bonta* (March 12, 2026) No. 25-2366 D.C. No. 5:22-cv-08861- BLF.

²²*NetChoice, LLC v. Bonta* (9th Cir. 2025) 152 F.4th 1002, 1025.

content filters that censor LGBTQ+ content. AB 1856 (Wicks, 2026) would update the law to, among other things, include websites.

Most recently, AB 1709 (Lowenthal, 2026) would establish minimum age requirements of 16 to have an account on certain social media platforms. Unlike Australia’s law that establishes an under-16 blanket ban on ten of the most used platforms, AB 1709 restricts people under 16 years old from having accounts on platforms that meet the definition of “addictive internet-based service or application” – a definition adopted from SB 976. Thus, platforms that do not use personalized recommendation algorithms intended to drive engagement – opting instead for chronological feeds – would not be covered. Additionally, AB 1709 only prohibits users under 16 from creating accounts and does not bar these users from viewing content without an account. For example, platforms such as YouTube can still be accessed without an account. YouTube is widely used by the LGBTQ+ community as a resource hub, including for viewing “coming out” stories and personal experiences shared by individuals from similar cultural, geographic, or familial backgrounds, which can provide critical support and guidance. Finally, AB 1709 authorizes the Attorney General to adopt regulations to alter the bill’s scope to apply to ensure it applies only to platforms with truly addictive features, allowing for the possibility of excluding online spaces that use personalized algorithms but that are nevertheless sufficiently safe by design. AB 1709 is opposed by some LGBTQ+ advocates, who voice concerns that social media platforms, especially for rural LGBTQ+ youth, offer a valuable lifeline to young people understanding their identities that would be severed by a social media ban.

Recent lawsuits. For decades, social media companies have been able to evade liability by invoking Section 230 of the federal Communications Decency Act of 1996, which shields online platforms for harms associated with content posted on the platforms by third-party users. Two recent groundbreaking lawsuits have found social media companies liable for harming users, based on the novel legal theory that social media design features, as opposed to third-party content, were the source of harm.

First, in 2024, a New Mexico jury found Meta violated the state’s Unfair Practices Act by hiding what it knew about the dangers of child sexual exploitation on its platforms and impacts to child mental health. “Meta’s design features enabled pedophiles and predators to engage in child sexual exploitation on Meta’s platforms. Evidence from those witnesses and other industry experts also demonstrated that Meta intentionally designs its platforms to addict young people and, contrary to Meta’s public commitments, expose them to dangerous content related to eating disorders and self harm.”²³ The jury ordered Meta to pay a total of \$375 million in civil penalties.

Second, earlier this year, a jury in Los Angeles found YouTube and Meta’s negligent design of their products was a substantial factor in causing the plaintiff’s mental health distress. She testified that her compulsive use of social media as a child led to anxiety, depression, and thoughts of self-harm. The jury agreed that addictive features like infinite scroll, autoplay, push notifications, and algorithmic curation of content exacerbated her mental health condition. The

²³ New Mexico Department of Justice, “New Mexico Department of Justice Wins Landmark Verdict Against Meta” (Mar. 24, 2026), <https://nmdoj.gov/press-release/new-mexico-department-of-justice-wins-landmark-verdict-against-meta/>.

jury ordered Meta and YouTube to pay the plaintiff \$3 million in compensatory damages, with 70 percent assigned to Meta.²⁴

Both cases are likely to be appealed.

III. HOW LGBTQ+ YOUTH ENGAGE WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

The internet, and more specifically social media, is a useful tool for all ages to support connection and exploration. This is especially true for LGBTQ+ youth, who engage with social media consistently more than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. According to one report, while non-LGBTQ+ adolescents spend 4.8 hours online, LGBTQ+ adolescents spent an additional 3.72 more hours online, totaling 7.19 hours of screen time daily.²⁵ LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience problematic screen use, such as social media addiction, compared to heterosexual peers, likely due to the increased screen time.²⁶ The impacts of social media on LGBTQ+ youth have been described as a double-edged sword, allowing for increased awareness of LGBTQ+ identities while also increasing risks for harassment and cyberbullying by peers and strangers alike.²⁷ Indeed, three-quarters of LGBTQ+ youth (aged 13 to 17) feel that social media is essential for LGBTQ+ youth, highlighting the ability to express themselves authentically online as paramount to their wellbeing.²⁸ However, LGBTQ+ youth are at greater risk for harassment and unwanted online interactions than their peers, and many popular platforms do not provide adequate safeguards for youth, including the LGBTQ+ community.

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) releases a yearly report analyzing various safety metrics of common social media platforms, known as the social media safety index.²⁹ The index scores platforms on a scale of 100 based on a range of metrics including whether the platform has policies for protecting LGBTQ people from hate, harassment, and violence; whether the platform allows users to add and change gender pronouns; whether the platform allows users to limit the platform from collecting and using data related to sexual orientation and gender identity; and whether the platform provides training for content moderators focused on LGBTQ safety, privacy, and expression.³⁰ In 2025, all of the evaluated platforms (TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Threads, and X) received failing scores from

²⁴ Tyler Katzenberger, “Meta, YouTube found liable for social media addiction in landmark trial,” *Politico* (Mar. 25, 2026), <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/03/25/meta-youtube-found-liable-for-social-media-addiction-in-landmark-trial-00844625>.

²⁵ Jason M. Nagata et al., “Associations between sexual orientation and early adolescent screen use: findings from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study,” *Annals of Epidemiology*, vol. 82, (June 2023), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1047279723000534?via%3Dihub>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Mary Madden et al., “A Double-Edged Sword: How Diverse Communities of Young People Think About the Multifaceted Relationship Between Social Media and Mental Health,” *Common Sense Media*, (2024), https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2024-double-edged-sword-hopelab-report_final-release-for-web-v2.pdf; Celia Fisher, X. Tao, & M. Ford., “Social Media: A double-edged sword for LGBTQ+ youth,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 156, (July 2024), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563224000621?via%3Dihub>.

²⁸ “LGBTQ+ Youth Perspectives: How LGBTQ+ Youth are Navigating Exploration and Risks of Sexual Exploitation Online,” *Thorn*, (June 2023), https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Thorn_LGBTQ+YouthPerspectives_ExecutiveSummary_June2023.pdf (“LGBTQ+ Youth Perspectives”).

²⁹ “2025 Social Media Safety Index,” *GLAAD*, (2025), https://glaad.org/smsi/2025/summary-conclusions-recommendations-methodology/#_ftn1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

GLAAD, with TikTok ranking highest at 56 out of 100 and X ranking lowest at 30 out of 100.³¹ In addition to somewhat lackluster policies designed to protect LGBTQ+ users, many platforms employ artificial intelligence (AI) content moderators that disproportionately suppress and remove LGBTQ+ content.³² Current platform policies, therefore, do not sufficiently protect LGBTQ+ interests, raising important questions about how to maximize the benefits of social media for LGBTQ+ people while minimizing the risks.

It is also important to note that LGBTQ+ youth are not a monolithic group. Experiences on social media can vary significantly based on intersecting identities, including race, ethnicity, disability, immigration status, and geographic location. For example, LGBTQ+ youth of color and those in rural communities may rely even more heavily on online spaces for culturally relevant support and representation.

IV. THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON LGBTQ+ YOUTH

Finding resources and information regarding sexual and gender identity. As aptly depicted in the hit-series *Heartstopper* when the protagonist, Nick Nelson, Googles “am I gay?” – the internet is often the first place questioning teens turn to for answers about identity.³³ According to a 2023 Human Rights Campaign (HRC) survey of over 12,500 LGBTQ+ youth aged 13 through 17, nearly all LGBTQ+ youth surveyed (over 95 percent) have used the internet to find information about their identity.³⁴ For many young LGBTQ+ people, the internet offers a space to investigate sexual orientation and gender identity without the risk of being outed, and social media can amplify LGBTQ+ stories and voices that many youth, especially those in rural locations, would not be able to experience within their own physical communities.

Unfortunately, many LGBTQ+ youth do not find their homes and families to be supportive of their identities, forcing many to turn to online spaces for answers and support. Fewer than 40 percent of surveyed LGBTQ+ youth feel that their homes are affirming, compared to nearly 70 percent who find online spaces affirming of their identity.³⁵ One report found that over 80 percent of LGBTQ+ young people surveyed were out online, compared to only 53 percent in person.³⁶ These discrepancies were larger for transgender and nonbinary teens – 80 percent were out online compared to 40 percent in person.³⁷ Dating apps tell a similar story: over 50 percent of LGBTQ+ young adults (18-25 years old) were out on a dating app before they were out to family

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Sophia Chen, “The lost data: how AI systems censor LGBTQ+ content in the name of safety,” *Nature Computational Science*, vol. 4, (2024), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s43588-024-00695-4>.

³³ “Heartstopper – nick taking sexuality quizzes,” *YouTube*, (Apr. 22, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYL0IBMBwOY>.

³⁴ “LGBTQ+ Youth and the Internet: 2023 LGBTQ+ Youth Report,” *Human Rights Campaign Foundation*, (Nov. 1, 2023), <https://www.hrc.org/resources/lgbtq-youth-report>.

³⁵ “2023 U.S. national survey on the mental health of LGBTQ young people,” *The Trevor Project*, (2023), <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023>.

³⁶ “‘I Wouldn’t Be Here Today’: LGBTQ+ Young People’s Experiences in Online Spaces,” *Born This Way Foundation/Hopelab*, (2025), <https://assets.hopelab.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025-Without-It-I-Wouldnt-Be-Here.pdf> (“I Wouldn’t Be Here Today”).

³⁷ *Id.*, p. 26.

and friends.³⁸ Social media and other online spaces offer LGBTQ+ youth the opportunities to learn from and engage with other LGBTQ+ individuals, with one transgender teenager noting:

I feel like it's hard to meet trans people and learn things about trans people even if you are trans, just in day-to-day interaction because one, there aren't that many and two, a lot of trans people don't really want you to know that they're trans, and that makes it hard to start a conversation, and I can't blame them because I'm in that boat. But social media because there's more anonymity there really, more people are open to talking about their experiences as trans people and helps you understand it more.³⁹

Building community and safe spaces. One of the greatest potential benefits offered by social media for LGBTQ+ young people is the opportunity for community with other LGBTQ+ people. Some 92 percent of LGBTQ+ youth feel at least somewhat safe expressing their identities online, compared to half (49 percent) of respondents who feel somewhat safe expressing themselves in person.⁴⁰

Supportive online communities can demonstrate real benefits for LGBTQ+ youth. However, these spaces do not perfectly replicate safe, in-person experiences, as can be observed by differences in depression rates for LGBTQ+ youth. While there were no observed differences between the rates of depression for LGBTQ+ youth who had very supportive online spaces compared to those who did not (47 percent versus 52 percent), in-person support was associated with significantly lower rates of depression.⁴¹ Twenty-eight percent of LGBTQ+ teens who had a very supportive in-person space reported symptoms of depression, compared with over half (53 percent) who had somewhat supportive or worse in-person spaces.⁴² The loss of in-person support networks was especially pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the lockdown forced LGBTQ+ young people inside and away from common LGBTQ+ events like Pride. With many LGBTQ+ young people suddenly living full-time at home with unsupportive family without a break for school and extracurriculars, many turned to online communities for comfort and community.⁴³ LGBTQ+ youth, especially transgender and gender non-conforming youth, experienced higher rates of mental health challenges such as depression and suicidal ideation during the pandemic compared to cisgender and heterosexual counterparts (63 percent vs. 30 percent), likely exacerbated by reduced access to health care support and in-person community.⁴⁴ Given the direct benefits of in-person spaces on mental health, one teen LGBTQ+ girl suggested:

³⁸ "The Future of Dating 2023," *Tinder*, (2023),

https://www.tinderpressroom.com/image/Copy_of_FOD_Report_2023_FINAL.pdf.

³⁹ Ellen Selkie et al., "Transgender Adolescents' Uses of Social Media for Social Support," *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 66, is. 3, (Mar. 2020), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1054139X19304215#sec3>.

⁴⁰ "I Wouldn't Be Here Today," *supra*, p. 11.

⁴¹ *Id.*, p. 13.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Jessica N. Fish et al., "'I'm Kinda Stuck at Home With Unsupportive Parents Right Now': LGBTQ Youths' Experiences With COVID-19 and the Importance of Online Support," *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 67, is. 3, (Sep. 2020), [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(20\)30311-6/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(20)30311-6/fulltext).

⁴⁴ Lisa D. Hawke et al., "Mental health among transgender and gender diverse youth: An exploration of effects during the COVID-19 pandemic," *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, vol. 8, is. 3, (2021), <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2021-12684-001>.

Instead of looking at the data and thinking, ‘Oh, how can we prevent online spaces (from being risky)?,’ we should ask how can we make in-person spaces even more supportive for LGBTQ+ youth, so that they don’t have to invest all their energy and emotions into relationships that are online. . . ‘How can we make physical spaces more comfortable?’⁴⁵

LGBTQ+ specific online spaces. Given that many popular social media platforms do not provide adequate safeguards against hate speech and harassment, several LGBTQ+ organizations have started their own online platforms for young adults to promote community building.⁴⁶ Many of these platforms, such as the ones outlined below, do not use personalized feeds and would therefore be excluded from AB 1709’s regulations.

Give Us The Floor (GUTF). A nonprofit aimed at establishing a safe online environment for LGBTQ+ youth and their allies, GUTF provides a free mobile app to allow peer-facilitated discussions where:

Trained youth facilitate the confidential and anonymous groups, and participants help each other talk through prevalent mental health and social issues such as depression, loneliness, anxiety, identity, discrimination, bullying, relationships, domestic violence, and body image.⁴⁷

GUTF’s 10-year impact report highlights that over 16,000 LGBTQ+ youth (aged 13-24) in distress have been supported on the app, with 85 percent reporting that GUTF helped with their struggles.⁴⁸ The platform operates fully anonymously and prohibits one-on-one communication, opting instead for peer-moderated group chats covering a range of topics and on-call crisis response with mental health specialists. Each peer-moderated group chat is made up of a small number of people and requires that there be no more than two years between the younger and older individuals in the group chat. Additionally, GUTF’s community channels, which are broken up by topics such as “identity and community out” or “apply to colleges”, etc., are separated by teenagers versus 18+ young adults. Ninety-seven percent of users find the platform to be a safe space, highlighting how LGBTQ+ created and focused platforms can serve as affirming spaces for young LGBTQ+ people.⁴⁹

TrevorSpace. Hosted by the Trevor Project, TrevorSpace is an online community for LGBTQ+ young people between 13 and 24 years old. With over 700,000 members, TrevorSpace offers clubs, similar to GUTF, where groups of people can chat about a range of topics and issues. Additionally, TrevorSpace has the option to “Reach A Counselor” tab that directs users in the United States and Mexico to connect with a crisis counselor via text, chat, or phone call.⁵⁰ TrevorSpace relies on harm reduction tools that scan posts for inappropriate content as well as chat moderators who review reported content to determine if the post violated the platform’s policies or applicable law. According to TrevorSpace:

⁴⁵ “I Wouldn’t Be Here Today,” *supra*, p. 14.

⁴⁶ “2025 Social Media Safety Index,” *supra*.

⁴⁷ “About Give Us the Floor,” *Give Us The Floor*, <https://giveusthefloor.org/about>.

⁴⁸ “10 Year Impact of Peer-led Support: 2015-2025,” *Give Us The Floor*, (2025), <https://giveusthefloor.org/s/10th-anniversary-impact-report-2015-2025-2.pdf>.

⁴⁹ *Id.*, p. 11.

⁵⁰ “We’re here for you,” *The Trevor Project*, <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help/>.

Discussions on TrevorSpace are led by its community members and not the moderation team. To ensure TrevorSpace remains a place for peer support first and foremost, TrevorSpace moderators do not offer advice or weigh in on conversation topics. However, they will intervene . . . if a topic is at risk of violating our guidelines or applicable law.⁵¹

LGBTQ+ focused platforms aim to create safe environments where young people can express themselves and their identities without fear of retribution or harassment. However, one of the benefits of ensuring that all platforms are safe and free from harassment is increased awareness and exposure to LGBTQ+ people and culture, which can effectively reduce stigma and bias.

Increasing awareness of LGBTQ+ issues and reducing bias. As with any minority group, increased representation and visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals helps offset prejudice and negative perceptions. A 2020 report released by GLAAD found that non-LGBTQ people who were exposed to LGBTQ media images were more likely to be accepting and comfortable with LGBTQ+ people, demonstrating the value of LGBTQ+ representation in reducing bias.⁵² The past several years, however, have seen a decrease in on-screen representation for LGBTQ+ individuals, especially representations of transgender or gender non-conforming individuals.⁵³ With studios turning away from LGBTQ+ representation, social media may serve as a viable lifeline for LGBTQ+ visibility. As one transgender writer highlights:

I don't have cable. I don't pay for streaming services. I don't have access to the representation I want. So I turn to social media, as do LGBTQ identifying youth who don't have access either or who can't openly watch shows with queer characters out of fear of being outed or harassed at home. Tweens and teens take to YouTube, TikTok, Tumblr, Instagram and other platforms to find friends and community. They are looking for advice and encouragement in judgment-free zones.⁵⁴

Concerns about how social media age-restrictions will impact LGBTQ+ kids. In response to the tide of social media age limits across the world, many LGBTQ+ advocates voiced concerns about the impacts of these policies on LGBTQ+ youth. A coalition led by LGBT Tech wrote in March:

Under-16 bans are a broad restriction on access to modern communication and community spaces. These bans do not target specific harmful behaviors or product risks. Rather, they limit access to an entire category of lawful online participation and restrict access to platforms that are central to speech and association in modern life.

These bans disproportionately harm marginalized youth, including LGBTQ+ youth, young people of color, and those in unsupportive or hostile environments. For many, online spaces are among the first or only accessible sources of identity-affirming community, support networks, and youth-serving organizations or educational resources. In a worsening political

⁵¹ Team TrevorSpace, "TrevorSpace and Safety," *TrevorSpace*, (May 1, 2024), <https://www.trevorspace.org/resources/archive/blog/trevorspace-and-safety-r83/>.

⁵² "LGBTQ Inclusion in Advertising & Media," *GLAAD*, (2020), <https://glaad.org/inclusion>.

⁵³ "2025 Studio Responsibility Index," *GLAAD*, <https://glaad.org/sri/2025/president-letter/>.

⁵⁴ Amber Leventry, "The importance of social media when it comes to LGBTQ kids feeling seen," *The Washington Post*, (Sept. 19, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2019/09/20/importance-social-media-when-it-comes-lgbtq-kids-feeling-seen/>.

and social environment for many young people, policies that sever these lifelines are not neutral. They increase isolation and may restrict help-seeking.

Under-16 bans also risk pushing youth into less safe, less moderated environments. Young people are unlikely to stop seeking connection online when mainstream platforms become inaccessible; instead, many may turn to less safe workarounds or spaces with fewer guardrails. That displacement undermines the safety goals these proposals purport to advance.

These proposals also risk creating a chilling effect on reporting and help-seeking. Young people who experience harassment or exploitation on platforms may be less likely to report abuse or seek help if doing so requires admitting the presence of a prohibited account. Correspondingly, if youth are legally barred from participation, platforms face reduced pressure to invest in relevant safety features and improvements in moderation designed to protect younger users. The result here is fewer harm signals and significantly weakened accountability and feedback loops across platforms.⁵⁵

In addition, restricting or banning access to social media may reduce visibility and access to real-world, in-person resources. Many LGBTQ+ youth rely on social media platforms to discover local LGBTQ+ community centers, Pride events, community support groups, and other inclusive spaces. Limiting access could therefore unintentionally decrease participation in in-person programming and weaken connections to local LGBTQ+ infrastructure that supports youth wellbeing.

As mentioned above, the Legislature is currently considering AB 1709 (Lowenthal), which prohibits accounts for users under the age of 16 on platforms that use personalized feeds. Younger users would continue to be able to access platforms without accounts or that make chronological feeds available – as is the case with both TrevorSpace and GUTF. Additionally, the bill allows the Attorney General, by regulation, to alter the scope of the bill to ensure it continues to apply only to platforms with truly addictive features.

V. THE POTENTIAL HARMS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON LGBTQ+ YOUTH

Risks for cyberbullying. While the anonymity of the internet can offer young people opportunities to explore identity without fear of public outing and possible rejection, anonymity can also allow for online bullying and harassment with impunity. These risks are faced by nearly everyone who logs on to social media, but they can be amplified for young LGBTQ+ people. A 2024 report published by the Centers for Disease Control found that roughly one third (34 percent) of teens aged 12-17 had experienced bullying in the last 12 months, with middle-school aged children (12-14 years old) experiencing higher rates of bullying – 38 percent – compared to 15–17-year-olds (30 percent).⁵⁶ LGBTQ+ youth experienced the highest rates of bullying (47 percent) compared to heterosexual cisgender students (30 percent).⁵⁷ Surveys of young LGBTQ+ people conducted by the HRC found similar numbers, with roughly half (49 percent) of

⁵⁵ Shae Gardner, “LGBT Tech Leads Coalition Statement in Opposition to Age-Minimum Social Media Bans,” *LGBT Tech*, (Mar. 24, 2026), <https://www.lgbttech.org/post/lgbt-tech-leads-coalition-statement-in-opposition-to-age-minimum-social-media-bans>.

⁵⁶ Gelila Haile et al., “Bullying Victimization Among Teenagers: United States, July 2021 – December 2023,” *National Center for Health Statistics*, (2024), https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db514.htm#section_2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

respondents experiencing cyberbullying in the past year.⁵⁸ One 17 year-old LGBTQ+ youth stated:

Me and my friends have been bullied for being LGBTQ+. I have posted about my identity and been attacked by bigots saying horrid things to me. I've also been rejected by "friends" for my identity and people arguing with me that I'm not valid. My friends have been harassed and grossly fetishized for being LGBTQ+ as well.⁵⁹

Perhaps even more concerning, 80 percent of LGBTQ+ youth who experienced cyberbullying reported that they would feel uncomfortable reporting the incident to educators, and nearly 70 percent said they did not believe that the platform where they experienced cyberbullying would help resolve the bullying.⁶⁰ Not only are young LGBTQ+ people experiencing higher rates of cyberbullying than their non-LGBTQ+ peers, they have little faith that educators or platforms will protect them from these incidents.

Young people's fears that educators and social media companies will not intervene on their behalf is not unfounded. In recent years, anti-LGBTQ+ legislation has drastically increased, with a record number of anti-LGBTQ+ bills being introduced across the nation, many of which are aimed directly at LGBTQ+ youth, particularly transgender youth and gender-expansive youth. These bills seek to roll back nondiscrimination protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity, bar youth from accessing gender-affirming health care, prohibit access to facilities and activities aligning with their gender, and forcibly out LGBTQ+ youth, to name a few examples.⁶¹

The rise in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation coincides with a rising tide of online harassment and bullying of LGBTQ+ people. In the month following the 2022 passage of Florida's "Don't Say Gay or Trans" bill, which prevents teachers from discussing gender identity and sexual orientation in classrooms, the volume of tweets associating the LGBTQ+ community with slurs such as "groomers" and "pedophiles" increased by 406 percent, from 1,300 tweets to over 6,600.⁶² Hate speech directed at hospitals and doctors that provide gender-affirming health care, especially to young people, has also increased under the current administration, leading to offline violence and – as was the case for Boston Children's Hospital – even bomb threats.⁶³

Augmenting the rise of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, social media platforms have also reduced their content moderation policies that serve to protect marginalized communities, including the LGBTQ+ community. In 2025, for example, Meta announced it would be removing content moderation that protects LGBTQ+ people to allow users to share, among other things,

⁵⁸ "LGBTQ+ Youth and the Internet," p. 5.

⁵⁹ *Id.*, p. 5.

⁶⁰ *Id.*, p. 6.

⁶¹ Cullen Peele, "Weekly Roundup of Anti-LGBTQ+ Legislation Advancing In States Across the Country," *Human Rights Campaign*, (May 16, 2023), <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/weekly-roundup-of-anti-lgbtq-legislation-advancing-in-states-across-the-country-5>.

⁶² "Digital Hate: Social Media's Role in Amplifying Dangerous Lies About LGBTQ+ People," *Center for Countering Digital Hate & The Human Rights Campaign*, (2022), p. 13, <https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/CCDH-HRC-Digital-Hate-Report-2022-single-pages.pdf>.

⁶³ "Online Harassment, Offline Violence: Unchecked Harassment of Gender-Affirming Care Providers and Children's Hospitals on Social Media, and Its Offline Violent Consequences," *Human Rights Campaign Foundation*, (Dec. 8, 2022), <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/new-human-rights-campaign-foundation-report-online-hate-real-world-violence-are-inextricably-linked>.

“allegations of mental illness or abnormality when based on gender or sexual orientation, given political and religious discourse about transgenderism and homosexuality.”⁶⁴ Following X’s acquisition by Elon Musk, the platform removed options to report “misgendering or deadnaming,” a common attack on transgender people, opting instead for broader categories such as “Dehumanization” and “Violent Speech.”⁶⁵ Correspondingly, a survey shared by GLAAD found that 60 percent of respondents experienced an increase in abusive and hateful speech on the platform since Musk took over the company, demonstrating the consequences of these lax hate speech policies.⁶⁶ Thus, current platform policies are insufficient at protecting vulnerable LGBTQ+ individuals from the deluge of online harassments and threats of violence that have increased rapidly in recent years.

Risks for sexual exploitation. Another complicating factor with internet anonymity is that it allows young people to explore their sexual orientation and gender identities, but can also lead to risky behaviors, especially for young people who are more likely to experiment with unsafe behaviors than adults.⁶⁷ Features such as direct messaging allow a direct line of communication between users, regardless of their age or whether they actually know the individual messaging them. Across platforms, adult users can message and interact with users who are minors, potentially exposing these youth to risky interactions and behaviors, such as sexual exploitation. LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience unwanted or potentially risky behaviors online, including sexual exploitation. According to one survey of over 1,600 young people, LGBTQ+ people are between 1.5 to two times more likely to experience risky online encounters compared to heterosexual peers.⁶⁸ This is in part because LGBTQ+ teens are nearly twice as likely to maintain online-only relationships compared to their peers, increasing their likelihood of encountering predators.⁶⁹

LGBTQ+ teens are more than twice as likely to receive a request for nude photos from someone they didn’t know online (19 percent vs 8 percent of heterosexual teens), twice as likely to report being blackmailed or receiving threats (10 percent vs 5 percent), and are three times more likely to have an adult friend befriend and try to manipulate them online (19 percent vs 6 percent).⁷⁰ Cisgender LGBTQ+ male teens were the most likely of any teen demographic to share nude images (25 percent), and were twice as likely to report asking someone else to share nude images than other demographics, and were two or more times as likely to report that they had re-shared nude photos or videos of someone else.⁷¹ Over half of all cisgender LGBTQ+ male teens (54 percent) reported receiving an unsolicited nude image, compared to 26 percent of cisgender heterosexual male teens.⁷²

⁶⁴ Kate Conger, “Meta Drops Rules Protecting L.G.B.T.Q. Community as Part of Content Moderation Overhaul,” *The New York Times*, (Jan. 7, 2025), <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/07/business/meta-lgbtq-hate-speech.html>.

⁶⁵ Molly Sprayregen, “Twitter just made it even harder for trans people to report online abuse,” *LGBTQ Nation*, (Oct. 8, 2023), <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/10/twitter-just-made-it-even-harder-for-trans-people-to-report-online-abuse/>.

⁶⁶ “Hateful and Abusive Speech Towards LGBTQ+ Community Surging on Twitter Under Elon Musk,” *Amnesty International*, (Feb. 9, 2023), <https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/hateful-and-abusive-speech-towards-lgbtq-community-surging-on-twitter-under-elon-musk/>.

⁶⁷ “Teens and risky behaviour,” *Unicef*, <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/mental-health/teens-risky-behaviours>.

⁶⁸ LGBTQ+ Youth Perspectives.

⁶⁹ *Id.*, p. 5.

⁷⁰ *Id.*, p. 6.

⁷¹ *Id.*, p. 7.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Not only are LGBTQ+ teens more likely to experience online risky encounters such as sexual exploitation, they are also less likely to report these instances to an adult.⁷³ Cisgender LGBTQ+ male teens, the demographic most exposed to unwanted sexual attention, are also the group most likely to attempt to handle unsafe online experiences on their own: nearly half (45 percent) of surveyed cisgender LGBTQ+ male teens stated that they would attempt to handle unsafe online experiences alone.⁷⁴ The concerns from LGBTQ+ teens surrounding disclosing unsafe experiences stems from fears about being cut off from critical online communities, as well as fears that disclosing these encounters would out the teen to their family members.⁷⁵ Indeed, as highlighted below, being outed due to online activities is a prevalent concern for LGBTQ+ teens.

Privacy concerns and being outed. With the growing tide of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, many young LGBTQ+ people, especially transgender or gender expansive youth, worry that being outed online may threaten their safety and mental health. Many platforms have a default expectation for a user profile to be public and offer a variety of measures, such as enabling users to easily and automatically add people from phone contacts, aimed at growing follower count. Although the intention is to create overlapping online and offline networks with ease, for young LGBTQ+ people exploring their identity or living in unsupportive home environments, these settings may risk outing young LGBTQ+ people.

Despite perceptions of the internet as a space for anonymity and self-expression, concerns about what is “public” (meaning available to be viewed by followers) leads many LGBTQ+ youth to try and hide their online activity. LGBTQ+ teens are twice as likely to have secondary accounts compared to their cisgender heterosexual peers and one in three LGBTQ+ teens reported creating the secondary account before the age of 13.⁷⁶ LGBTQ+ teenagers with secondary accounts were less likely to interact with school mates on the account, and were almost 1.5 times as likely to engage with people they only know online.⁷⁷

Regardless of the efforts taken to hide their identities online through secondary accounts, many young people still face risks of being outed by their social media presence. School computers that monitor online activity have inadvertently outed LGBTQ+ students, with 29 percent of LGBTQ+ students reporting that they or someone they know has been outed by these tools.⁷⁸ In countries where homosexuality is discouraged or illegal, social media outings can threaten an individual’s physical safety. In Ethiopia, a clip posted on TikTok of two men dancing at a party led to a torrent of homophobia and physical threats, eventually culminating in one of the men fleeing the country.⁷⁹ This event underscores a sobering reality: even LGBTQ+ teens who do not have a social media account risk being outed online by the pervasiveness of cell phones with video cameras. In a society where everyone has a phone capable of recording, no one is truly anonymous.

⁷³ *Id.*, p. 8.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Id.*, p. 9.

⁷⁶ *Id.*, p. 4.

⁷⁷ *Id.*, p. 5.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Laird and Aaron Spitler, “Brief – Hidden Harms: Targeting LGBTQ+ Students,” *Center for Democracy & Technology*, (Oct. 19, 2022), <https://cdt.org/insights/brief-hidden-harms-targeting-lgbtq-students/>.

⁷⁹ Kaine Pieri, “Outed on TikTok in Ethiopia: ‘How a dance nearly cost me my life’,” *BBC News*, (Dec. 5, 2023), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67612331>.

VI. CONCLUSION

As California continues to lead on technology and LGBTQ+ equality, addressing the complex relationship between social media and youth wellbeing will require thoughtful, balanced policymaking. Social media plays a significant role in the lives of young people, particularly LGBTQ+ youth, who often rely on online spaces for identity exploration, community, and access to supportive resources. At the same time, growing evidence highlights meaningful risks associated with platform design, online harassment, exploitation, and excessive use and addiction.

Research and data demonstrate:

- LGBTQ+ youth rely more heavily on online spaces for identity exploration, support, and community, particularly in unsupportive environments.
- LGBTQ+ youth face disproportionately higher risks of cyberbullying, harassment, and unwanted online interactions.
- Many of the most significant harms are linked to platform-design features, including algorithmic amplification and engagement-maximizing systems.
- Access-based restrictions, such as age limits, may reduce exposure to harm but also risk limiting access to critical resources and support networks.

At the same time, California has taken a leadership role in advancing policies aimed at addressing the root causes of social media-related harms, particularly through efforts to regulate addictive design features and improve online safety for young users.

Addressing these challenges will require a nuanced approach that recognizes both the benefits and risks of social media. Policies that reduce harm while maintaining access to supportive resources will be critical to ensuring that youth, including LGBTQ+ youth, can safely navigate online spaces and access the connections and information they need to thrive.